

Viewpoint: Resource Wars

Energy, Resource Conflict, and the Emerging World Order

An interview with [Michael T. Klare](#) by [Barry S. Zellen](#)

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While terrorism, and the struggle to defeat it, has dominated much of the post-9/11 security debate, a new faultline underlying world politics has gained attention in recent years, one that could increasingly define our future conflicts. This faultline is defined by natural resources: who's got them, who needs them, and who has the means to secure them.

Indeed, resource conflict and its inescapable logic appears to explain many of the strategic moves made by the United States in recent years, and in particular its efforts to transform the political landscape of the Middle East, home to the world's largest petroleum energy reserves. Opponents of the U.S. military engagement in Iraq often utter the phrase "No blood for oil," suggesting that energy resources, and not counter-terrorism, might lie at the root of America's Iraq war policy. But it's not just anti-war slogans that suggest the hidden hand of geopolitics underlying our current conflict: indeed, many experts of international conflict see international competition for increasingly scarce natural and energy resources as a core, and increasingly salient, cause of conflict between and within states.

Michael T. Klare, the Five College Professor of Peace and World Security Studies at Hampshire College, is one of the world's leading experts on resource conflict. He sees natural resources at the heart of conflicts past, present and future. A prolific writer and analyst, he is author of *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt & Co., 2001) and more recently, *Blood and Oil: The Dangers and Consequences of America's Growing Dependency on Imported Petroleum* (Henry Holt & Co., 2005). His newest book on this issue, *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy* is due out in April 2008.

Strategic Insights had the opportunity to interview Professor Klare, to gain insight into the causal link between natural resources and international conflict, and to better understand this increasingly important faultline in world politics.

SI: Has resource competition long fueled military conflicts, from ancient times to the contemporary period? How might a lens of natural resource competition help explain past conflicts, such as World War II and the Cold War, smaller regional wars, as well as the current war in Iraq?

Klare: Resource competition has been a decisive factor in driving conflict since the earliest recorded wars, in the ancient Near East. Then, as now, states fought for control over land that was suitable for agriculture—usually river valleys (the Tigris-Euphrates basin, the Jordan basin,

the Nile basin, and so forth) or areas near springs and oases. Wars have also been fought over other valuable resources, including valuable minerals, timber, and spices.

The great colonial expansion by the European powers that began in the 15th century and continued until the early 19th century was largely driven by the pursuit of resources—land, timber, gold, minerals, spices, slaves, furs, rubber, and oil, among others—and this outward drive often sparked clashes with the indigenous inhabitants of these territories as well as among the imperial powers themselves. What we call the French and Indian War (the Europeans call it the Seven Years War), for instance, was sparked by conflict between Great Britain and France over the control of resource-rich territories in North America, India, Africa, and Asia. Many of the skirmishes that led up to World War I, especially those arising in Africa, also had this character.

During the Cold War, resource-related conflict of this sort was largely subordinated to the ideological struggle between the two superpowers but did not disappear altogether. America's presidents were perpetually worried about the emergence of radical nationalist regimes in the oil-producing areas of the Middle East, and this played a key role in shaping U.S. foreign policy during this period. These fears led, for example, the President Eisenhower's decisions to cooperate with the British in the 1953 effort to topple the nationalist government of Mohammed Mossadeq in Iran and then to turn a deaf ear to British and French appeals for support during their ill-fated invasion of Egypt in 1956. The overthrow of the pro-U.S. Shah in 1979 and the rise of a radical Islamic regime in Iran also provided the backdrop to President Carter's January 1980 declaration that the United States would use force if necessary to repel any effort by a hostile power to block the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf—a declaration widely known as the "Carter Doctrine."

The basic tenets of the Carter Doctrine were cited by President Regan to justify U.S. intervention in the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 (in the guise of protecting Kuwaiti oil tankers that had been "reflagged" with the American ensign), and then by President George H. W. Bush to justify U.S. intervention in the First Gulf War of 1990-91, after Iraqi forces had invaded and occupied Kuwait. Rather than invade Iraq at that time to eliminate the threat posed by Saddam Hussein to the safety of Persian Gulf oil supplies, Bush I chose to quarantine Iraq and seek "regime change" through economic warfare—a strategy then embraced by his successor, Bill Clinton. This strategy was seen by President George W. Bush and his advisors as ineffectual, and so, soon after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Bush II determined that the only way to eliminate the Iraqi threat once and for all was through armed invasion. Various reasons were given for this at the time, but I believe that future historians will conclude that in many respects the Second Gulf War was a continuation of the First, and that both hark back to the Carter Doctrine for their original inspiration.

SI: Is resource competition playing a greater causal role in the outbreak of armed conflict now than in the past?

Klare: I would say that resource competition has played a key role in the outbreak of war throughout history, so it is hard to say if it is playing a greater role today than in the past. This having been said, I do think that we can anticipate an increase in the level of resource-related conflict in the future because there are no more "virgin continents" waiting to be settled by the excess populations of over-crowded, resource-stressed areas. When Europe's resources could no longer support its growing population, all sorts of incentives were provided to encourage people to resettle in North and South America, in Africa and Australia, and so on.

These territories, in turn, produced surplus food and other resources that were shipped back to the motherland. Today, virtually the entire planet is inhabited, and there are very few arable areas left that are not under cultivation. As a result, we are seeing increasingly bitter conflicts over land in many parts of the world—in a way, the tragic struggle in Darfur is emblematic of this trend.

The same is true of many other resources. Virtually the entire planet has been scoured in the search for valuable sources of energy and minerals, and the rate of new discovery has dropped sharply in recent years. Moreover, most of the world's known reserves of oil, natural gas, copper, uranium, and other vital materials have been brought into production or are likely to be so in the not-to-distant future. This means that we are becoming ever more dependent on a finite supply of critical materials at a time when the global demand for these resources—driven, in part, by the rise of China, India, and other newly-industrialized countries—is expected to soar. Under these circumstances, all of the conditions that might have prompted conflict over resources in the past are likely to become magnified.

SI: In addition to petroleum resources, what are some of the other natural resources whose (potential) scarcity could (or already do) contribute to international conflict? Looking ahead to the end of this century, what are some of the resources that might cause future wars?

Klare: Well, in the energy field, natural gas is already a source of conflict. For example, China and Japan have squared off over the Chunxiao gas field in the East China Sea. This field extends into an area claimed by both countries, and both seek to extract its reserves in order to diminish their reliance on imported energy. Neither side has been willing to compromise on the matter, and both have threatened to rely on military means if necessary to protect their interests. In the fall of 2005, moreover, China stationed a squadron of naval vessels on its side of the disputed area while Japan began regular flights by maritime patrol aircraft on its side, leading to several close encounters between Chinese and Japanese forces—precisely the sort of behavior that could easily lead to unintended escalation in some future crises between the two countries. Disputes over the possession of offshore natural gas fields could also be a source of conflict between Iran and its neighbors in the Persian Gulf, and between the littoral states of the Caspian Sea.

As more states come to rely on nuclear power for a greater share of their energy supply, uranium could also prove to be a source of international conflict. Like oil and natural gas, uranium (at least in its most concentrated form) is a relatively finite commodity and many of its most readily accessible deposits have already been depleted, so it is not unrealistic to assume that conflict could arise in the future over the remaining sources of high-quality uranium ore.

Diamonds, minerals, and valuable timber supplies have also been a source of conflict in the past, and are likely to be so again in the future. Conflicts over these resources are unlikely to involve the major powers, but will more likely involve rentier states, warlords, ethnic militias, and assorted non-state actors. However, they often produce great humanitarian disasters, like the wars in Sierra Leone and the Congo, which in turn spark involvement by the major powers in a peacekeeping capacity.

SI: Is the strategic competition between the United States and China over resources contributing to the perpetuation of armed conflicts around the world? Do you see a similarity between the current U.S.-China strategic relationship and the pre-WWII relationship between Japan and the United States? Might other ascendant powers (such as India) contribute to further resource competition and conflict?

Klare: Yes, the U.S.-China competition is contributing to the perpetuation of armed conflict in the world because both powers often seek to cement their ties with potential resource suppliers in the developing world by providing them with arms and other forms of military assistance, which often then find use in internal conflicts. Thus China, in pursuit of Sudanese oil, has cemented its ties with the northern government in Khartoum by supplying a wide range of arms, which reportedly have been used in the government's "scorched earth" campaign against SPLA rebels in the South.

Likewise, the United States has assisted the Nigerian government in its crackdown against tribal militants in the Niger Delta region, the main center of Nigerian oil production. Both the United States and China are also providing arms and military aid to the various regimes in Central Asia, and this, too, I fear, will strengthen the tendency of these regimes to rely on force and repression to rule, rather than to allow greater democratic participation.

The situation in the Caspian Sea basin is particularly worrisome because the delivery of arms is being accompanied by the formation of incipient military alliances—the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on one hand, the U.S.-backed alliance of Azerbaijan and Georgia (united around protection of the BTC pipeline) on the other. While there is still a great deal of fluidity in the situation, I do see this as bearing some similarity to the situation in the Balkans prior to World War I.

SI: With some experts noting evidence of accelerated global warming, how might this affect resource competition and international conflict?

Klare: Global warming will affect resource competition and conflict profoundly. Although global warming's effects cannot be predicted with certainty, it is likely that it will produce diminished rainfall in many parts of the world, leading to a rise in desertification in these areas and a decline in their ability to sustain agriculture. This, in turn, could force people to fight over remaining sources of water and arable land, or to migrate in large numbers to other areas, where their presence may be resented by the existing inhabitants. Indeed, some analysts believe that the conflict in Darfur is partly driven by such phenomena.

Global warming is also expected to produce a significant rise global sea levels, and this will result in the inundation of low-lying coastal areas around the world. Again, the result will be the widespread loss of agricultural lands, forcing many millions of people to migrate to higher areas, possibly encountering resistance in the process. Because many poor countries will be unable to cope with the catastrophic effects of global warming, state collapse is a likely result along with an accompanying epidemic of warlordism, ethnic violence, and civil disorder.

SI: Do you have any closing comments to share with us on the relationship between natural resources and international conflict? As well, please tell us about your current work.

Klare: What strikes me about all this that we are seeing the emergence of a new world power configuration in which the possession of energy and other key resources is the principal indicator of national strength, rather than the possession of military arsenals, as was the case in the Cold War era and in prior centuries.

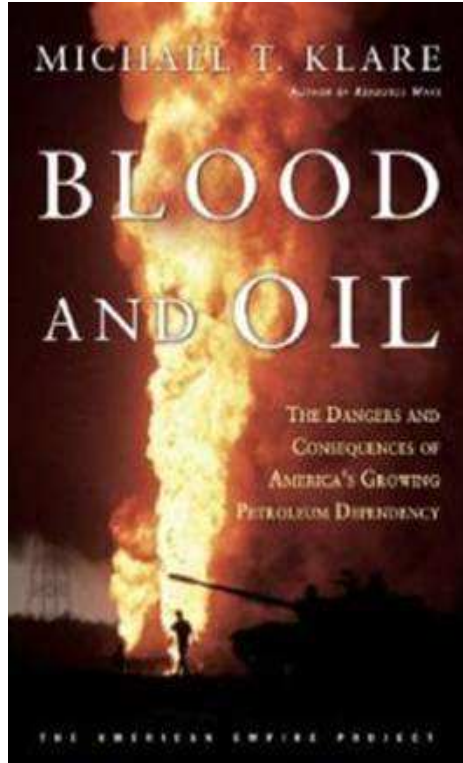
Russia, once the defeated has-been of the post-Cold War era, has acquired new prominence because of its abundance of oil, natural gas, coal, and uranium; the United States, the supposed victor of the Cold War, has been found to suffer from significant vulnerabilities because of its deep dependency on imported petroleum.

The more we look into the future, I believe, the more a nation's relative standing in the world will be determined by such criteria—this, at least, is the argument I will make in my new book, *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet*, due out later this year from Metropolitan Books of Henry Holt & Co.

About Michael T. Klare

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Blood and Oil: The Dangers and Consequences of America's Growing Dependency on Imported Petroleum (Henry Holt & Co., 2005). Klare is a leading expert on resource conflict, and views natural resource competition at the heart of conflicts past, present and future. His newest book on this issue, *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy* is due out in April 2008.



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